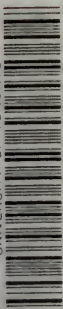


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Brett, George Sidney  
Some reflections on Aris-  
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With the writer's  
compliments  
G. S. Brett

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SOME REFLECTIONS ON ARISTOTLE'S  
THEORY OF TRAGEDY

G. S. BRETT

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REFLECTIONS  
ON  
ARISTOTLE'S VIEW OF TRAGEDY

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## REFLECTIONS

ON

### ARISTOTLE'S VIEW OF TRAGEDY.

#### I.

In all literature, ancient and modern, there are a few conspicuous passages which afford the perennial charm of mystery. Each generation of students looks on them, as Desire looks on the Sphinx; and one or another is drawn by magic into the maze of explanations which are the ghosts of former efforts. Such is the passage in which Aristotle once defined Tragedy, and if this essay achieves no final solution of the riddle, it may at least deserve the grace due to any honest venture which sustains the unfinished quest.

As this is not, in the words of the academic regulations, a contribution to knowledge, I have called it a budget of reflections. It represents in fact a voyage of the mind, a voyage of exploration directed more by desire than purpose and terminated by arrival at a stopping place rather than a final goal. The beginning of the quest was in the passage which defines the nature of tragedy (*Poetics*, 1449b 24) and more particularly in the word *κάθαρσις*. The way led naturally through a forest of explanations, all of them familiar to students of Aristotle, and left one uncertain whether this grove was not the one originally designated by the philologists as 'lucus a non-lucendo.'

Thus far the journey had been uneventful and my experience seemed to coincide with the slightly pessimistic mood of

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Zeller. The right course seemed to be to acknowledge frankly that there was no real solution of the puzzle, or that life was too short for such quixotic campaigns. But in an age that substitutes 'becoming' for 'being' and admires process more than finality, there is no small excuse for the unambitious pilgrim who only desires to tell his story. Accordingly I will continue to explain why satisfaction was not felt, and how the quest proceeded. This will lead to a final statement that the most useful part of this study was the comparison of the different works from which material could be drawn, namely the *Politics*, the *Ethics*, the *Rhetoric*, the *Poetics*. The results can hardly claim to be novel or revolutionary, but some value may be discerned in a method which elucidates a topic by widening the scope of its significance.

### II

The original topic is the idea expressed by the term *κάθαρσις*. This word has many shades of meaning, but we may follow the expositions of the editors and reduce them to three. Summarily stated these are (a) the religious, with the meaning 'lustration'; (b) the pathological, or medical sense of 'purgation'; (c) the moral, with the idea of 'purification.'

These three interpretations are clearly not exclusive; they do not form a true logical classification, because there is no single principle of classification and no way of determining the limits of each division. If, for example, religious purification is taken to include the relief of a burdened conscience, it includes one part of the medical significance: for 'purgation' is defined as producing relief and restoring a normal state in an organism whose equilibrium depends equally on physical and psychic factors: while the third meaning is a compound of the other two, since moral purification implies the objective



ritual of 'lustration' and the subjective 'purgation' of the humours which corrupt body and soul. These three interpretations, therefore, differ only in emphasis.

This rather tame conclusion is, in fact, a significant point. If the student will read through Bywater's list of translations, beginning from Paccius in 1527,<sup>1</sup> he will see that they are different (when there is any difference) because their authors knew that the emphasis might be put on one or other of these three phases, but had no established principle on which to base their preference. Bywater<sup>2</sup> claims to have shown that 'the pathological interpretation of *κάθαρσις* was not unknown in Italy in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries': as that was the time when the 'humours' were again made the basis for explaining character, temperament and the passions, this fact is not surprising. Bywater himself thinks this 'physiological metaphor' is the real explanation of *κάθαρσις*. His reasons are mainly philological, that is to say he relies on the uses of the word in Aristotle. He is prepared therefore to reject Lessing's view that 'the tragic purification of the passions consists merely in the conversion of pity and fear into virtuous habits of mind.' In addition to all other reasons for doubting this interpretation there is one of supreme importance; for Lessing obviously deduces his views of *κάθαρσις* from his view of Tragedy. To estimate the value of Lessing's view we should be compelled to discuss the whole question as to whether Lessing's idea of tragedy coincided with Aristotle's; and whether in any case the definition given in the *Poetics* states what Tragedy actually does, or gives an ideal definition of what it ought to do. But this discussion will be postponed indefinitely, because it is enough for the present purposes to recognize the profound difference which

<sup>1</sup>Bywater, *Aristotle on the Art of Poetry*, p. 361.

<sup>2</sup>*op. cit.*, p. 152.



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exists between a statement of actual psychological effects due to a specific art (τέχνη) and a theory of aesthetic values. Whatever means we adopt for establishing the exact sense of *κάθαρσις*, the argument must *not* take the form 'since tragedy ought to have a moral effect, therefore its elements must have a purifying effect.' On the contrary (as Bywater recognizes) we must first decide scientifically how passions are aroused and what phenomena are normal, leaving it to the 'politician' to make use of these facts if our science of poetry affords him the means to his own ends.

### III.

The question of means and ends introduces a new phase of the subject. Aristotle is distinguished from his master Plato by his love of system; and this is not merely a love of divisions, subdivisions and titles; it is rather a love of order and relevancy by which he is perpetually driven to make fine distinctions and limit his topics. Knowing that this is Aristotle's very nature, we must not forget its influence even where it is not expressly shown. On the contrary we may assume that context, in the wide sense, is all-important: we may assume, for example, that the field of one treatise will differ from that of another in such a way as to alter the focus of all its constituent parts. On this assumption there will be good ground for making separate investigations into the different treatises involved.

Margoliouth<sup>3</sup> tells us 'every one agrees that the first clue is the passage near the end of the *Politics*, where there is a reference to the *Poetics* for further light.' This statement encourages us to expect a real solution of the problem, but in fact Aristotle says: 'the word *purgation* we use at present

<sup>3</sup>Margoliouth, *Aristotle, Poetics*, p. 56.

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without explanation, but when hereafter we speak of poetry, we will treat the subject with more precision'! And Jowett adds, faintly in a foot-note, 'cp. *Poet.* c. 6, though the promise is really unfulfilled'!<sup>4</sup> Apart then from what we read *into* this passage, we have little warrant for expecting any help from it. Yet the whole passage in the *Politics* is important, for reasons now to be considered.

The general topic in the *Politics*, Book VIII (Jowett's trans.), is education. The work as a whole being a handbook for statesmen, the subject of education is treated in a manner which is strictly 'practical'. We can imagine ourselves attempting to justify our ways to an inspector who asks, What are you educating them *for*? We prepare ourselves with a list of suitable answers—the useful, virtue, knowledge—but in fact we remain a little uncertain which answer is likely to turn away wrath: perhaps the best course is to survey what tradition makes us accept, and analyse the curriculum!

Some subjects are easily placed: reading and writing, of course, for all manner of obvious advantages: gymnastic for the body: 'music, to which is sometimes added drawing.'<sup>5</sup> Alas! these 'extras' never seem quite well placed: the parents want them, but object to the fees: the Inspector worries about their utility: and some one in the smart set says that anyhow the flute will never do, it makes you look so funny!<sup>6</sup> A musical genius, lacking in good taste, suggests that music is really quite valuable, something like sleep or intoxication;<sup>7</sup> and when this shocking remark dies away, a solemn voice is heard pointing out that God plays no instrument!

What help are we to get from this abortive attempt to conciliate the Education Department. Frankly I should expect

<sup>4</sup>*Aristotle's Politics*, translated by Benjamin Jowett p. 314, 1905.

<sup>5</sup>*Politics*, 1337b.

<sup>6</sup>*Pol.*, 1341b.

<sup>7</sup>*Pol.*, 1339a.

## ARISTOTLE'S VIEW OF TRAGEDY

none save for the fact that Aristotle is trying to solve a really profound problem, the last great problem of the statesman—how to educate a nation to make right use of its leisure. This is the real ‘problem’ of education: the busy man is a slave; he runs after things which spring up automatically before him; but leisure is the activity which creates and creative activity has its place in civilization because a ‘leisured class’ appreciates it, encourages it, and may even practise it. This is the answer so far as music is concerned: we did not invent it, for it is natural: we did not make it pleasant, for it always had a curious affinity with our moods which makes us enjoy even a melancholy strain: we cannot neglect it, for people whistle and sing of their own accord, and classical music is really only the most refined way of ‘playing with the rattle.’<sup>18</sup> The elaboration of these phases would be a ‘metaphysic’ of music: our present scope is politics, and all we need to prove is that the good of the community requires its citizens to be good judges of musical performances: every one must be so far acquainted with music as to know what kind of music is being played and what its value is for the audience. A normal audience is simply a ‘gathering’, and music is a good ‘entertainment’ because it provides an occupation (hearing) in which all can share. There are also parts of audiences to be considered separately—the young, the extreme temperaments, the ‘vulgar crowd composed of mechanics, labourers and the like.’ Here too our statesman is justified. The experts tell us that there are ‘ethical melodies, melodies of action, and passionate or inspiring melodies’<sup>19</sup>: and all the statesman requires to know is the results which the experts give him. So Aristotle passes on to his next point, that music should be studied for the sake of many benefits—namely education, purgation, intellectual enjoyment.

<sup>18</sup>*Politics*, 1340b.

<sup>19</sup>*Pol.*, 1341b.



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This is our climax, and its character should be carefully estimated. The state must keep music in its curriculum because it will in the future need at least three types of persons: (1) those who understand its use for education and become music teachers, either as being great performers or composers or theorists (exponents of the theory of music); (2) those who understand its use as a part of the medical treatment of the pathological emotions; (3) those who form the cultured audiences and are the genuine critics, who do not perform on instruments or practise on patients, but live the life of the just citizen made perfect.

In all this, finally, Aristotle says nothing specifically about purgation and nothing at all about tragedy: he only explains why music is to be a part of education as regulated by a state. Unlike Plato he seems to regard the question as primarily concerned with occupations. The highest occupation of man is the use of intellect, and this is shown in sound judgement. Drawing is to be studied because it produces sound judgement of the human form: and we may add that as such it will be useful in the criticism of gymnastics, for the citizen will disapprove of physical training if it tends to brutalize. Similarly music is to be studied because it produces sound judgement of melodies and rhythms, which are important because they increase and decrease passions, and so affect deeply the life of man, as being a mixed creature. It is significant that Aristotle provides 'popular' music for the masses: there are many degrees in a commonwealth and the 'animal' element in music is a sort of common denominator: it will not offend the cultured, for 'feelings such as pity and fear . . . have more or less influence over all', but they will regard it critically and judge its merits by the *λόγος* in themselves and the 'rule of art' which it embodies along with its 'sweetness.' Perhaps Aristotle understood obscurely why folk-songs and popular

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airs have been so often the essence of the greatest music: for nature creates them in the undiscovered depths of feeling and art recreates them for the mind that demands explicit rules of method (τέχνη) and intellectual enjoyment (διαγωγή).

### IV.

The problem of means and ends, from which we reached the required parts of the *Politics*, will also lead into the *Rhetoric*. Here we shall find another phase of the questions concerning 'pity and fear and the affections of this class': we shall find also that Aristotle is thinking about politics again from a different angle, and rises to a view of the whole situation which, as a whole, seems to comprehend the real essence or genus of which politics, rhetoric, and poetics are distinct.

The art of Rhetoric arises as a 'variation' from Logic. Logic, dialectics and rhetoric are all arts occupied in providing proofs. In a perfect world, controlled by reason, nothing would be needed except logical proof: all sequences or connexions could be logically demonstrated and all persons would accept the conclusions as rational. But the actual world is very different. If we admit a sphere of true science, necessary and demonstrative, there is also the important sphere of 'probabilities.' In fact, human affairs and human interests are generally uncertain and probable; so much so that a moral scepticism springs up and even honest people believe nothing is really quite certain. In this atmosphere the orator grows into a shallow 'pleader', trained in all the tricks by which emotions can be utilized to secure verdicts. This occupation is so profitable and so debased that 'rhetoric' scarcely means anything else. But Aristotle would distinguish the different types: beside the pleading of the law court

(δικανικόν) there is the 'consultative' (συμβουλευτικόν) argument: and this is the true type of 'rhetoric'.

This point must be scrutinized minutely; for the word 'orator' and the idea are alike too commonplace for the purpose; and it is easy to fail in estimating what seems to us utterly familiar. Yet we know that from Aristotle to Quintilian the great orator tended more and more to be the type of ideal citizen. This is not strange if we remember that the orator, as here defined, has practical judgement combined with the power of securing and controlling popular support. He is therefore a phase of the politician, fit to rule wherever government by persuasion is constitutional: and Pericles actually embodied the virtues which Aristotle assigns to the ideal orator. If we are to understand the teaching of Aristotle all ideas of oratory as merely an art of language must be relegated to the furthest background.

Yet of course nothing is more important than language in the equipment of the orator. Words are the means which he will employ and this class of 'sounds' will be his instrument, though we must not forget that he may write speeches not intended for delivery. For this reason Aristotle does not neglect the technical questions of oratory, questions of topic, style, rhythm and the like. But as these subjects are not important for the present discussion, no more attention will be given to them. The significant feature of Aristotle's treatise is that he considers the whole situation in which oratory has its function and realizes that speech is relative to hearing. If an argument falls on inattentive or disaffected ears, it is wasted. The orator must remember three things: (a) the logical method of proof, (b) the influence of his own presence according as his moral prestige (ᾗθος) adds to or subtracts from the weight of his words, (c) the attitude of the audience who may be willing or unwilling to reinforce his



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arguments by a benevolent and unprejudiced attitude (εὐνοία). A convincing argument is therefore very different from a correct argument. The difference lies in the simple fact that an argument is only convincing if some one is convinced. Rhetoric as an art must combine with its formal or logical elements a psychological part, and this is the reason why the second book of the *Rhetoric* is so largely concerned with the emotions which an orator must control.

This second book of the *Rhetoric* is so important that it deserves to be analysed in detail, but as space will not permit so elaborate a treatment, the most important features must be selected as proofs of the argument here evolved. My thesis, briefly, is that Aristotle's view of the meaning of *κάθαρσις* is to be derived from this source; that the required link between the *Politics* and the *Poetics* is here supplied: and, finally, that if we understand how far the politician is an orator, the orator an actor, and the actor both orator and politician, we shall attain a right interpretation of the whole subject. This in no way excludes any technical medical statements about 'purgation', all of which may be true; but it implies that neither politician nor orator nor poet is required to know the medical facts, any more than a person who regards a blush as a confession of guilt need also know what inner mechanism produces the visible effect.

In the *Rhetoric* the emotions discussed are all those which produce changes in persons and so affect their judgements (*κρίσεις*). They are all states which induce pleasure or pain, and the examples are anger, pity, fear καὶ ὅσα ἄλλα τοιαῦτα.<sup>10</sup> Anger is due mainly to the feeling that one is despised, and is expressed as resentment. The orator must remove this

<sup>10</sup>Others are actually discussed but the details cannot be given and this epitome, as given by Aristotle, is valuable as showing how pity and fear are uniformly selected to represent the whole group.

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resentment by first adopting the attitude of the resentful person and then showing that the objects of his anger are 'either formidable, or worthy of high respect, or benefactors, or involuntary agents, or as excessively afflicted at what they have done.'<sup>11</sup> These 'topics' will induce 'gentleness' (*καταπραΰνειν*) and what is then said in defence of the offender will be accepted without prejudice.

Let us suppose that the orator wishes his audience to feel fear (as might be the case if he were persuading them to be prepared for disaster or to refrain from some form of *ὑβρις*.) The *practical* orator will then make his audience 'think or feel that they are themselves liable to suffering: for (as you suggest) others greater than they have suffered: and you show that their equals are suffering or have suffered: and this came from such as they never expected it from: and when not expected.'

Pity is only possible to those who think they may suffer: men will not pity if they have already lost all, or deem themselves beyond the reach of all evil (i.e., *ὑβρίζουσιν*). Here follows a long list of the reverses of fortune which excite pity, and may therefore be regarded as proper 'topics.' Moreover, Aristotle here admits an element of 'acting' (*ὑποκρίσει*) to 'visualize' the facts (*πρὸ ὁμμάτων ποιοῦντες*).<sup>12</sup> This is supplemented in Book III by the treatment of style (*λέξις*) or delivery. This subject has been neglected, says Aristotle; and the reason is that it came late into tragedy and rhapsody: yet declamation is an important part of rhetoric and poetic, and it is gaining more importance owing to the corrupt state of public life.

The relation between appeals to emotion by 'acting' and the 'corruption' of the commonwealth must be emphasized here.

<sup>11</sup>Cope, *The Rhetoric of Aristotle*, vol. II, p. 41.

<sup>12</sup>*Rhetoric*, ii. c. 8 § 14 (Cope, vol. II, p. 105).



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As the basis of Rhetoric is conviction (*πίστεις*) and this is presumably right opinion, the purest form is rational, closely akin to logic: but the practical orator always has to consider the weakness of the audience, which is also fundamentally a decline in public standards (*μοχθηρίαν τῶν πολιτειῶν*).<sup>13</sup> Similarly in the *Poetics*, the use of appeals to emotion by extraneous arts is only justified by the weakness of the audience (*τὴν τῶν θεατῶν ἀσθένειαν*). Thus Rhetoric and Poetic have a common basis in the presentation of a plain unvarnished tale, which by its own virtue carries conviction: but the weakness of human nature requires the use of further appeals to the senses (of hearing in the case of sounds that reproduce expressions of joy or grief, of sight in the case of actions, gestures, or even mourning attire). Though these aids are practically necessary, they are not essentials, and it is therefore a matter for regret (*Rhet.*, iii. 1.) that the prizes are won by the actors rather than the poets, thus making the production more important than the play. All this, we can well understand, must have been very repugnant to Aristotle.

### V.

The preceding sections are intended to clear the ground. They show that each treatise has a specific topic and deals with a group of ideas from distinct points of view. This is to be noted carefully, for any light we may hope to get on the subject of tragedy must be derived from this fact. Our thesis is, in brief, that some, if not all, of the difficulties vanish when we remember that Aristotle limits himself in the *Poetics* to the analysis of a form of art. If this is the case, we can deduce at once that no question of effects produced on the spectators enters into the definition of tragedy. On general principles it

<sup>13</sup>*Rhet.*, iii. 1. 5.



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seems to me almost impossible that Aristotle should include in a definition of an 'essence' anything that is extraneous or accidental: he would be far more inclined to assert that a tragedy remains a tragedy, though no one hears or sees it, just as virtue remains virtue though unrewarded, and a triangle is a triangle though embodied in no material form. But as this a priori argument will lead into many conflicts with existing views, I will present it purely as a working hypothesis.

Let us assume then that the actual definition of Tragedy involves no reference to any 'purgation' experienced by the audience, and that the purgation remains an essential part of tragedy. This view will be supported (a) by those who reject Lessing's 'moral' interpretation, (b) by Margoliouth in so far as he realizes that the passions would be excited and therefore increased rather than expelled, (c) by the shrewd comment of Bywater<sup>14</sup> that this treatment would be so rare and intermittent as to be worthless. Special attention may be given to Bywater's point because it is almost the only sign I have found among editors that they appreciate the false subjectivity of modern commentators. Nothing can be achieved until the reader's mind is cleared of the notion that Aristotle is speaking of a modern theatre to which people can turn for relief six days a week, if they like; or that 'psychological appeal' is to be regarded as having any place in the ancient conception of an art.

But the most potent argument for our hypothesis is the fact that it is very difficult to find in Aristotle any reference to this 'purgation' of the audience. The original definition says nothing about it; at 1450b 16 Aristotle says 'the tragic effect is quite possible without a public performance and actors': and when the audience is mentioned it seems to be regarded

<sup>14</sup>p. 156.

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as having a 'weakness' which induces the writer of plays to aim at pleasure and corrupt his art (1453a 35). The 'spectacle' is excluded from the essence of tragedy, though it is a part of theatrical production (1450b 20), and Aristotle remains throughout more clear on this distinction between the play and its *χορηγία* than most of his commentators. In matter and in tone there is a striking parallel between these passages and the corresponding sections of the *Rhetoric*: the good speech is also a work of art, corrupted by any appeal to emotions and made perfect by the right union of logical proof, character (*ἦθος*) and diction. The actual outcome of successful oratory is a conviction. Perhaps the real work of Tragedy is to produce a type of conviction suited to the transcendent nature of its topics. ✕

I would digress a moment to ask whether even Bywater's excellent translation is not really affected by his view of the function of tragedy, and actually distorted to maintain it. To show that this is the case I will consider what Aristotle says about the 'Fable or Plot' (Bywater, p. 23 *seqq.*). The Plot is the most important thing in Tragedy: it is by nature an organism, almost: its unity is logical, an inner bond of necessity: its incidents arouse pity and fear. What then should the Poet aim at? (*ibid.*, p. 35). What are the conditions of the tragic effect? Aristotle says: '(1) A good man must not be seen passing from happiness to misery, or (2) a bad man from misery to happiness. The first situation is not fear-inspiring or piteous, but simply odious to us.' (p. 35). So runs the translation, but there is nothing in the Greek about 'to us'! So again 'The second is the most untragic that can be; . . . it does not appeal either to the human feeling in *us*, or to *our* pity or to *our* fears.' But the text has no equivalent for any of these words underlined. Is it significant that Bywater puts them in and Aristotle leaves them out? I think it is, and ✓



without citing further evidence I will explain why the translator should avoid such additions.

I think Aristotle meant *ἐλεεινόν* and *φοβερόν* to stand by themselves as marks of real causes, things truly pitiable and truly fearful, whether any one actually felt pity and fear or not. There might always be a Jason to say, 'What's Hecuba to me?' but Hecuba is a tragic figure *ἅπλως*, not *πρὸς ἡμᾶς*. So in the *Ethics* we are told that the man who excused himself for killing his mother talked nonsense: there is no such excuse! But if no one feels pity and fear, what is the meaning of the remark? The answer is that Aristotle is making an analysis: the sequence of events in the drama is the point at issue. The plot is bad if the cause of fear is inadequate, because the *dramatis persona* who responds with the tragic horror is then merely ridiculous. The quality of the play depends on the just balance of action and reaction: to express fear when nothing is truly fearful is comedy: to be indifferent toward the ordinary causes of fear is merely to fail in sustaining the part.

The persons who ought to 'feel' what the situations involve are the poets (1455a 31): they must have the special gift, almost a touch of madness, to see that invisible world of thoughts and motives which will be reincarnated in the actors. The audience can be expected to feel pleasure, for there is a pleasure of tragedy (1453a 36), and it is wholly distinct from the 'pleasant ending' which is in character more comic than tragic. Tragedy requires to be serious, and therefore the pleasure it affords can hardly be a feeling of joviality: it must rather be a sense of satisfaction. If this is satisfaction with the divine order of the world, if tragedy thus 'justifies the ways of God to men,' we come back to the 'moral' view of its function. And this I think Aristotle would admit to be the actual result of the best tragic dramas, but I feel equally sure



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that he would not include this extraneous result in the definition of the *essence* of tragedy. In any case, the resulting satisfaction would not be a subjective mood of purified passion, but a function of judgement.

This argument can now be concluded. The definition of Tragedy is taken to be a definition of its essence: this essence consists practically in the nature of the plot, for the rest is really a matter of production in the technical sense, the 'staging': the plot of a tragedy (as distinct from comedy) is always concerned with situations which involve pity and fear: these are the two factors with which it works, and it ends in a resolution of the tension indicated by these emotions, a clearing up of the emotions which belong to its sphere. It is difficult to invent such situations, for the persons involved must be 'better than ourselves': the plane of tragedy is elevated, and a 'hero' must by necessity occupy a conspicuous position; so that the poet is easily tempted to over-reach himself and achieve that success which we call melodrama. Since the situation must be 'possible', and yet a marvel to all, Aristotle thinks the poets do well to use only the accepted subjects, such as '*The Oedipus*.' Clearly the audience was very critical; it might easily discount all the merits of a play by refusing to accept its plot: as Aristotle says, if a thing *has* happened, no one can dispute its possibility. The history of Greek drama certainly suggests that the audiences had no craving for novelty of subject: surprise was an element in the treatment rather than the choice of a subject. All this goes to show that the audiences must have been as a rule pretty well acquainted with the pitiable and fearful things they were to behold: and this familiarity would hardly increase the 'purgative' effect, or might even produce immunity.

As the actual 'histories' of Priam, Hecuba, Oedipus and others were well known, so the moral theme of *ὑβρις* is recog-

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nized as having become the focus of tragic drama. The sin has been committed somewhere at some time: God is not mocked: there is a cosmic tribunal where the Eternal Reason by the logic of cause and effect delivers its judgements: the prisoner at the bar is not a common criminal but something greater in scope, an inheritor of crime: he has no guilty conscience, but dark forebodings rise in the soul where memory (*ἀνάμνησις*) slumbers fitfully: as the coming doom draws near the indefinite suspicion becomes oppressive fear: in the climax the suffering is excessive, because the individual suffers for the sins of others and pays in his person for the guilt of his race: he is 'excessively afflicted' and therefore becomes truly pitiable.

If this is a correct outline of a typical tragedy as conceived by Aristotle it will show automatically why fear and pity are the chief emotional elements. Suffering is expressly included as an essential (1452b 10.). It is also significant that Aristotle says the chorus should be regarded as actors. This opinion must be due to the fact that the chorus tends to guide and control the development of the play on its emotional side: it emphasizes in words the emotional significance which the actors can only present symbolically. To put the matter a little crudely, the actor can only die physically: the chorus must add that he dies undeservedly or justly. Out of the welter of facts and emotions there should emerge a concrete idea of life, exhibited in an ideal type, showing why things must have happened as they did and why the verdict of time is reasonable. The merit of a work of art is to be convincing and this is its *κάθαρσις*.

### VI.

By way of epilogue and conclusion I may refer to some points which otherwise might seem unduly neglected.

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Considerable attention has been paid in recent times to the medical terms used by Aristotle. One of the virtues of Greek thought is the grasp which it always retains on the idea of the whole organism. Whether the corporeal elements, the 'body' as flesh, are praised, tolerated, or condemned they are at least not forgotten. The emotions, the expression of the emotions, and the whole complex of typical characters were subjects of increasing attention. The 'characters' of Theophrastus may be regarded as word-pictures of types, which actors might profitably study. But we cannot on this account quote Aristotle's medical phrases to prove that tragedy is a kind of medical treatment. For this reason the reliance placed on the technical passages in the *Problems* seems to me an error: they furnish no proof of the point at issue—namely, that Aristotle regarded the production of these physiological changes as a function of tragedy.

The relation of Aristotle to Plato is an important topic which cannot be adequately treated here. Bywater's reference to *Republic*, Book x, seems to me important for reasons other than his. Bywater<sup>15</sup> thinks that Plato regarded drama as harmful because it nourishes the weaker elements of our nature, the tendency to tears and laughter. This is truth but not the whole truth. The view I would suggest is that Plato and Aristotle agreed in thinking that the 'weakness' of the audience and the 'corruption of the constitutions' (quoted above) rendered the drama a source of danger. We might quote modern instances to show that a play involving a murder can inspire one of the weaker sort to commit murder. The fact is that susceptible people are affected *emotionally* and may therefore abstract from their context the emotional incidents of the play. The real justification of a play is in the appeal which it makes to judgement, not in the incidents

<sup>15</sup>Bywater, p. 153.



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which present the constituent events. While Plato sees an actual danger which can only be overcome by the production of the right type of spectator, Aristotle confines his attention to the nature of tragedy itself. So far as concerns the proper end of tragedy there is no reason to suppose that Plato and Aristotle did not completely agree in regarding it as an imitation of life with significance for those who understand. All art is removed from reality and has an element of illusion: but harm only results for those who forget this and are corrupted in their judgements.

There remains the haunting fascination of Aristotle's words—'through pity and fear achieving its catharsis of such emotions.' Are these words 'pity and fear' merely symbols of emotions, chosen at random, or is there a deeper significance in their appearance here? They suggest an antithesis and challenge attention by force of the reasons which must have made them prominent in Aristotle's mind. If nothing can be set down as certain, perhaps a benevolent hearing may be granted to one more speculative reconstruction.

Plato, as it seems, looked for a profound moral reform before the drama could be an aid to the good life. Aristotle here, as always, leans to a more gradual development, achieved through existing means. The beginning of life as action is the conative impulse (*ὁρεξις*): the end is contemplation. The young live by their feelings: years may bring the philosophic mind. The drama shows us life in a way which enables us to contemplate it: it presents a specimen of a class of lives so that it can be seen as a logical whole. In the slow movement of daily life we lose our sense of proportion: if we prosper, we think no harm can ever come to us: if we meet disaster, we think there can be no relief and justice is dead. Sometimes we forget God and are insolent: sometimes we

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despair and blame God. Margoliouth says that in their conduct 'every *dramatis persona* is hitting or missing an imaginary mark.' I am not sure that I understand this phrase in its context, but I will give it the meaning I should like it to have. The mark is the mean, as Aristotle describes it in the *Ethics*. Every actor shows us how the true mean may be hit or missed. Those who run to excess and over-reach themselves are to be reduced by fear: those who suffer are to find pity and relief in the working of 'poetic justice.' If this interpretation is narrowed and taken to refer to a single person, then the mean will consist simply in fearing what is greater and pitying what is inferior. In either case the terms 'pity and fear' may be taken to indicate the limits of passion in the two directions which are typically defect and excess: for pity corrects the tendency toward intolerance and inhuman conduct, while fear sets a limit to the ambition that o'erleaps itself. If this interpretation is accepted it indicates that Aristotle's definition was after all little more than a compact statement of the aims common to all the Greek tragedians. For the mean in human life is part of the order of the universe and the man who transgresses it will sooner or later bring into play all the forces that make for righteousness in the universe. The conflict between man's variable nature and the laws which rule him inexorably is the essence of tragedy. To present this concretely in action is to define it in terms of act and feeling, freed from all that is confusing and irrelevant. This will be the particular catharsis which tragedy achieves, and which the spectator will judge to be truth because his reason accepts what is clear and by intuition grasps the finality of the conclusion.

The reasons for the affinity between the *Politics*, the *Rhetoric* and the *Poetics* can be stated thus. In the *Politics* the question of education involves the development of char-

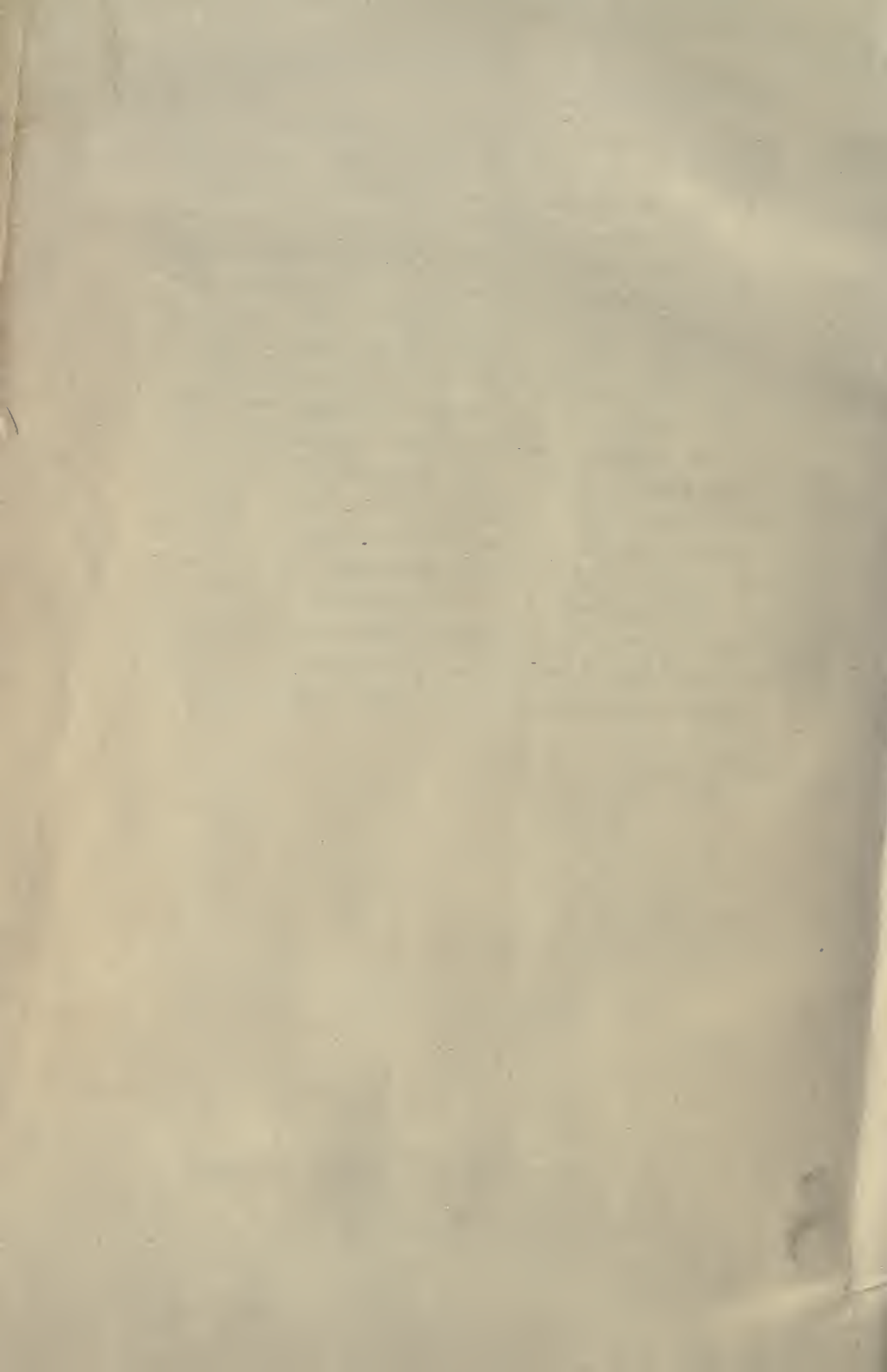
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acter, and music has a distinct place in the 'diet' which nurtures the soul: in the *Rhetoric* the *emotions* are to be considered as the irrational factors which affect judgement, and the result desired is a definite verdict for or against a particular act or person. Here the conclusion is on a relatively lower plane, because it is 'practical' and ends in the deliberate choice of action, a direction of desire in the sphere of things mutable. In the *Poetics* there is no question of future action; no pleading for a verdict: the scene is laid in the past, the events are therefore eternal and immutable: the spectator judges 'theoretically', that is contemplatively. As an aesthetic judgement this involves only aesthetic values, and perhaps Aristotle would not have rejected the idea that after the analysis of science and the analysis of the 'practical reason' he had in fact laid the foundations for a critique of 'judgement' in the Kantian sense. I would argue that failure to recognize these fundamental changes of viewpoint has been the chief error in interpretation and has obscured the fact that a term like *κάθαρσις* takes its meaning from its context.

G. S. BRETT.

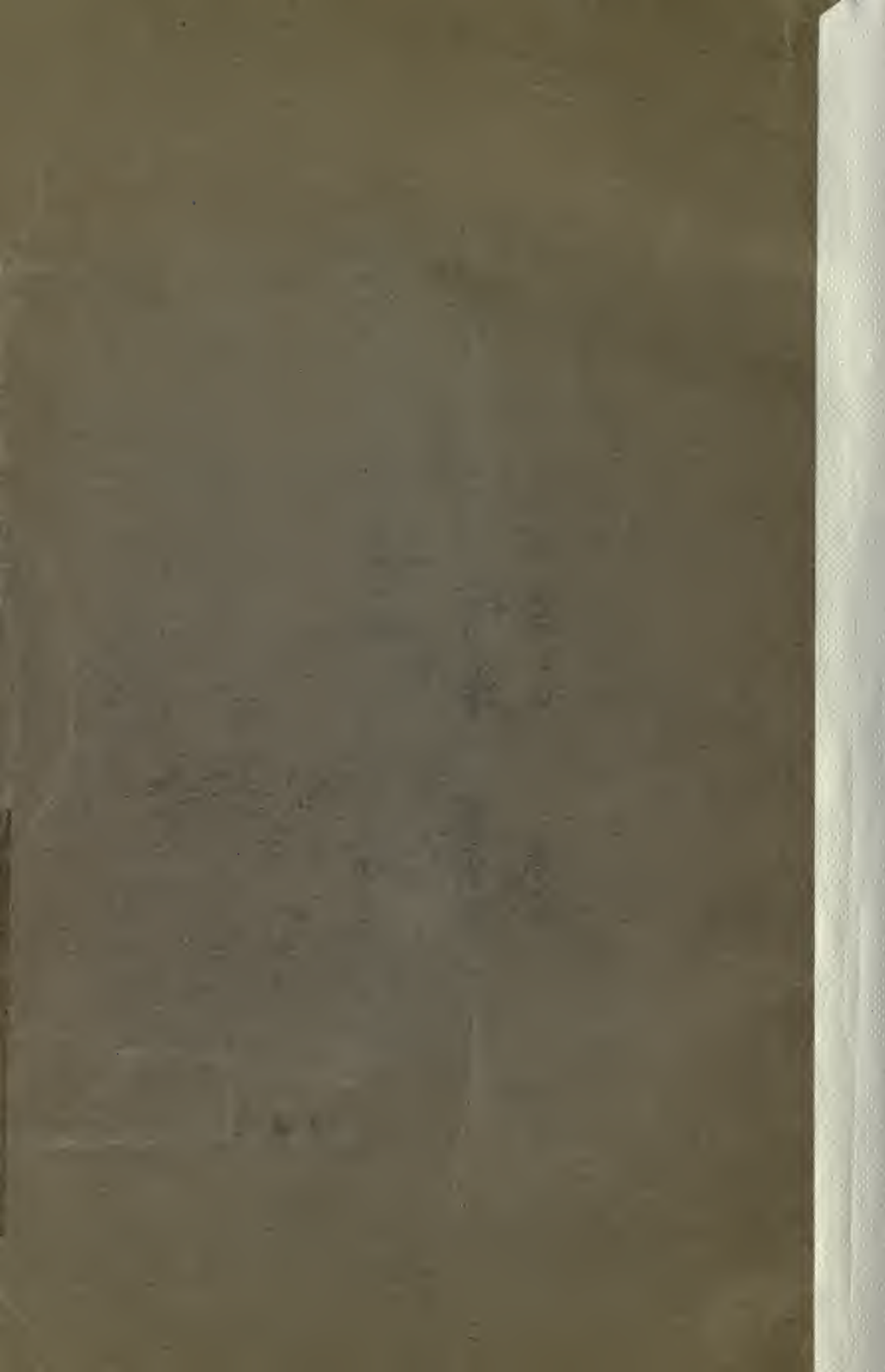












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